

The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities.

Helen B. Schwartzman. New York: Plenum Press, 1989. 344 pp. \$39.50.

This innovative and insightful volume provides a cogent illustration of the wisdom of interdisciplinary analyses of administration. The author, an anthropologist, explicitly adopts her discipline's tradition of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange by shifting a much-neglected (and often despised) institution—the meeting—from background to foreground. She uses this strategy of defamiliarization to challenge a number of accepted paradigms and frameworks, among them contingency theory, behavioral decision theory, conceptions of power, and the distinction between micro- and macro-level analysis. This critical approach allows her to advance a theory of meetings embedded in cultural systems. By focusing our attention on meetings as "sense makers" and sociocultural "validators," she moves interpretation beyond conventional task-and-tool-centered analysis to a strikingly original plane. The author argues persuasively that meetings are significant because they "generate the *appearance* that reason and logical processes are guiding discussions and decisions, whereas they facilitate . . . relationship negotiations, struggles, and commentary" (p. 42). Drawing from the anthropological literatures on formal organizations in complex

societies and on political speech and oratory, she adopts a social constructionist perspective of meetings that concentrates on the processes of enactment within organizations.

The book is reader-friendly to a fault. The first section of the volume is devoted to a literature review that demonstrates the short shrift social scientists have given meetings. Here the author rehearses the thesis that meetings may be the preeminent form that constitutes the organization and that they have interorganizational consequences that are rarely anticipated or intended. Here also the author details her discourse-analytic approach, derived in large part from the ethnography of speaking. The second section, the heart of the volume, contains an ethnography of the meetings within the organization that served as the author's field site. The organization—a local community mental health center—is described as an alternative organization with an exotic social system designed to experiment with nonbureaucratic ways of operating. The author details the ways in which meetings are constructed, conflicts are adjudicated, decisions are shaped, power is exercised, and interpersonal relations are negotiated in the variety of meeting types the organization recognizes. Her discussion of ethnographic methodology is especially helpful. In particular, the benefits of an emergent design and the utility of rigorous fieldnotes in facilitating post-hoc discovery of patterns in data are nicely illustrated. The semiotic perspective that allows the author to interpret material culture, everyday language, stories, and the meeting transcripts themselves is well developed. Interspersed through her analysis are long portions of the transcripts, which convey much contextual flavor to the reader. The final section of the volume contains a comparison of the meeting form in cross-cultural perspective. Here the author also delivers a compelling warning against privileging our "folk models" of social scientific phenomena, such as decision making, over the institutional forms through which these phenomena are expressed. Each of the book's chapters begins thoughtfully with appropriate orienting epigraphs and concludes with an interpretive summary. Scholarly footnotes are numerous and truly complementary to the author's argument.

The book has several notable strengths beyond the exemplary description and analysis of meetings. The tutorial style adopted by the author succeeds well both in surveying and integrating the management literature on meetings and in brokering an "exotic" anthropological literature of considerable practical and theoretical value to an audience of administrative scientists. The method and perspective advanced by the author are increasingly relevant in organization research. Her identification of culture- and discipline-bound assumptions and her challenge of the hegemony of research topics are especially welcome. Her call to incorporate the ambiguous and chaotic aspects of social life into our analytic models is being amplified across the social sciences. The avenues for potential research she identifies are promising.

The weaknesses of the volume are minor. The book takes off a bit slowly, and lament over the neglect of meetings grows

somewhat repetitive. Typographical errors are few and not distracting. The principal reservation concerns the limits to generalizability of the author's investigation. While studying alternative organizations may allow researchers to "develop perspectives on previously unquestioned aspects of American culture" (p. 8), to flesh out our understanding of "exotic" systems in contemporary society (p. 90), to enhance post-field interpretation (p. 109), and to discover more readily the social forms that "organize" the organization (p. 268), they differ in many ways from conventional organizations. The rich data provided by the author will suggest some of these differences to readers familiar with both types of organization. Further, where ethnographic detail is an anthropological strength, an exclusive focus on the exotic, the grassroots, the powerless, and the downscale in contemporary culture is an anthropological shortcoming. Perhaps this study will motivate other researchers to examine the meeting in more conventional organizations; it certainly provides the comparative detail and theoretical provocation for comprehensive analysis. In an era of experimentation with organizational design (where decomplexing and decentralizing are in vogue), however, alternative organizations may provide the model for conventional organizations of the future. In this event, the author's study could not have been more timely.

This book can be enthusiastically recommended to researchers in organizational culture and dynamics. It would serve well as a supplementary text in upper division and graduate courses in organization behavior, organization design, and leadership. It would also be valuable in more specialized courses in human services administration. Finally, for courses in research methods in organizations, the volume could serve as an ethnographic exemplar.

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